

Exclusive: State forcing All Aboard Florida to spend millions more for safety

By Arnie Rosenberg



The state is forcing All Aboard Florida to spend an additional \$47 million for safety upgrades. The improvements, known as “sealed corridors,” will be made at 57 grade crossings between West Palm Beach and northern St. Lucie County.

The Florida Department of Transportation confirmed the safety upgrades Tuesday. All Aboard Florida — which previously had refused to do the additional work — has agreed to the safety improvements, FDOT said.

“All Aboard Florida is unwavering in its commitment to meet the highest applicable safety standards set by the (Federal Railroad Administration) and Florida Department of Transportation,” said Michael Reininger, All Aboard Florida president and chief development officer, in a statement Tuesday. “Our project has been the subject of a comprehensive environmental-impact study, and the FRA is studying a wide range of potential impacts. We will fully comply with the improvements needed to achieve this surety.”

The additional safety work is expected to include four-quadrant gates and concrete medians to prevent motorists from driving around gate arms to cross tracks. It will be required in the stretch where trains’ speeds will hit 110 mph, from 30th Street in West Palm Beach to just south of the Indian River County line.

All Aboard Florida has insisted it would upgrade crossings to “the highest level of safety,” but refused to install sealed corridors because it wasn’t a requirement, according to a March 20 engineering report from the Federal Railroad Administration.

“Officials from All Aboard Florida ... have openly expressed that the proposed 110 mph segment will NOT incorporate the ‘sealed corridor’ concept,” according to the report. “They stated that since these are ‘guidelines, not regulations’ ... they are not obligated to incorporate any of the described crossing treatments ...”

In rejecting the federal agency’s recommendation, All Aboard Florida was “not exercising appropriate safety practices and reasonable care,” according to Federal Railroad Administration engineer Frank Frey, who wrote the report.

Asked in an April 16 interview about the railroad’s refusal to build sealed-corridor crossings anywhere along its 235-mile corridor, Reininger told Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers the railroad remained “steadfastly behind our commitment to create a safe and secure operating railroad and will fund all the necessary costs in improvements to ensure this outcome. We will, of course, comply with all applicable regulations and laws.”

Sealed-corridor crossings are different from quiet zones, which many communities along the rail corridor are exploring. At some crossings, the new safety upgrade will save the cost of quiet-zone construction, according to a leading opponent of the rail project.

"This will help negate quiet zones in some instances but not all," K.C. Traylor — founder of the largest All Aboard Florida opposition group, Florida Not All Aboard — said in a news release.

Traylor and others from the organization met July 14 in Tallahassee with Ananth Prasad, secretary of the Florida Department of Transportation, and FDOT officials Fred Wise and James Boxold, Prasad's chief of staff and legislative programs.

"Most questions of concern were answered and our positions given consideration," she said in the news release.

All Aboard Florida has become a target for groups such as Florida Not All Aboard. The \$2.5 billion project plans 16 daily round trips between Miami and Orlando, and its request for a \$1.5 billion federal loan to build its infrastructure has become the focus of opposition from organized groups, local governments along the Treasure Coast and from individuals.

Gov. Rick Scott said he favors the project, but both he and Prasad insist the privately funded effort will get no state money.

The 90-minute meeting came "at a critical time," according to Florida Not All Aboard's news release, because once the Federal Railroad Administration issues its environmental impact statement, it will be followed by a 75-day public comment period.